



Brussels, 31 October 2007

Dear Marian Harkin,

CEV, the voice of volunteering in Europe bringing together 59 national and regional volunteer centres and volunteer development agencies, very much welcomes your initiative to launch a report of the European Parliament on the role of volunteering in contributing to economic and social cohesion in the regions of Europe. This is a very important step forward to identify and recognize the value of volunteering and the range of positive impact it has on the different areas of regional development.

In the new generation of the EU's Regional Policy programmes convergence of regions and regional competitiveness as well as employment are the major priorities. CEV, strongly believes that the potential of volunteering to contribute to attaining these objectives is far from capitalized upon – and that volunteering needs to rank higher on the policy agenda if the EU wants to create a Europe where all regions benefit from equal opportunities and put in place policy for the prosperity of their citizens. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the role of volunteering in regional policies and actions that the European institutions can undertake to facilitate this role and contribute to the full potential of volunteering to be realized.

In order for this to happen, some of the underlying assumptions of regional policy might have to be reconsidered. Regional policies have generally recognized the role of human capital and financial capital in combating social exclusion. The role of **social capital**, on the other hand, has been insufficiently covered at regional level. Social networks and relations, common norms and values, and mutual understanding within groups are crucial factors for local community activities to prosper. Moreover, social capital is not merely a means towards (economic) growth and prosperity, but an end in itself and shall be recognized as an indicator equally important to economic data when benchmarking regions and their degree of development and wealth. In 2003 the European Foundation for the improvement of living and working conditions launched a project, which established that building social capital has improved the level of social inclusion and employment in disadvantaged regions and has provided new ideas and approaches for economic growth in those areas. And active citizenship, a thriving civil society and volunteering are key elements towards social capital building.

However, volunteering is not only about “hard to measure” impacts in terms of social capital. Volunteering has a significant impact on the **competitiveness and attractiveness** of the regions, and on the living conditions of their inhabitants. And volunteering also needs to be recognized as an economic factor in calculations of the GDP: We strongly agree with the director of the Statistics

Bureau of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), Mr. Sylvester Young when he states that “Volunteerism is an important contributor to economic development and needs closer measurement (...) A better understanding of the scope and contribution of volunteer work would improve policy-making and help raise living standards”. The EU should contribute to the ILO’s efforts to include volunteer work in labour force surveys complementing the initiatives of the Johns Hopkins University and the United Nations to map the economic value of volunteering in the world.

We strongly support the European Parliament’s suggestion within the Structural Funds package for 2007 to 2013 to strengthen the partnership principle: Appropriate bodies representing civil society organisations shall be involved in the structural funds partnership negotiations. A regional and local volunteering infrastructure can play a crucial role in this partnership – but still needs to be put in place on many parts of Europe, especially in regions “lagging behind”. This infrastructure is needed so that volunteering can contribute to regional development in the ways described below. Volunteering is freely given – but it is not cost free. Targeted infrastructure will promote, facilitate and encourage volunteering and help to realize its full potential and shall have its place in the implementation of regional policies.

Please do not hesitate to contact us for clarifications and further information,

Best regards,

[signed]

Markus Held
CEV Director

Why volunteering matters in regional policy

Volunteering contributes to all major priorities of the regional policy: it helps to improve the attractiveness and, thus, the competitiveness of regions and towns in Member States; it contributes to sustainable development; it is a motor for innovation and entrepreneurial spirit, provides learning opportunities and promotes employability and social inclusion:

- 1) **Volunteering is translating European values into practice:** While volunteering differs in Member States of the EU concerning traditions, activities, and age groups involved and legal standards in place, the values that underlie the engagement of these volunteers are common: They live solidarity striving for a more inclusive society and greater social cohesion and they directly respond to societal problems they care about. Volunteers are, thus, the human faces putting in practice the values that the European Union has been founded upon.
- 2) **Volunteering enhances social cohesion:** Volunteering is often referred to as the "social glue" that holds together different groups of people in society – younger people and older people, people of different faiths, ethnic groups, religious groups or groups with different social background – into a cohesive whole. Volunteers get involved in service provision for disabled people, for the ill, for homeless people – and volunteering can be a way of empowerment for these target groups if they volunteer themselves. Volunteering is also a means to escape isolation, especially important for those cut off from social networks in the workplace or their families. And volunteering is the means by which citizens are aware of social problems and the situation of their fellow citizens.
- 3) **Volunteering is a crucial instrument towards intergenerational solidarity.** By engaging together in local activities, volunteering is a means of bringing the generations together. This is particularly important in regions where more and more young people leave: Projects fostering intergenerational solidarity can enhance and increase the attractiveness for youngster to stay and feel connected to their local community, and for the growing number of the elderly to still be able to make a contribution. Most volunteers in Europe are still in the age group between 30 and 50 and in relatively highly educated parts of the population. Volunteering enables retired people to contribute to the community they live in and to make these communities an enjoyable place to live in. This is contributing to better health of these people still active and is a means of using the enormous potential and resource that senior citizens have cumulated all through their lives – a factor that regions with development needs cannot neglect.
- 4) **Volunteering as a means of gaining skills and life-long learning.** Volunteers gain a range of useful hard (vocational) skills and soft (interpersonal) skills including communication skills, organizational and time management skills, “people-skills” (such as caring, negotiating

and listening), accountability and assessment reporting, planning skills, budgeting skills and survival skills (such as stress management and prioritisation), to name only some. These skills can lead to better employability (see below), but are at the same time also an end in themselves as they will raise peoples' potential, self esteem and lead to their personal development (see the CEV-led MOVE project).¹

- 5) **Volunteering can be a precious tool in promoting employability.** As an informal and non formal learning experience, volunteering is particularly interesting for those excluded from the formal education system and (long-term) unemployed. Volunteering also is reported to help young people to clarify their career projects as a means of professional orientation – and it leads often itself to paid employment: It not only contributes to skills development but it helps the creation of a personal network of support and, thus, of social capital. (See CEV General Assembly report “Volunteering as a route (back) to employment”²)

- 6) **Volunteering enhances diversity and promotes integration and intercultural dialogue.** EVS and “Youth in the World” promote voluntary services of young people from different countries of the EU and the wider world in local communities. The encounter of local communities with these young volunteers brings a positive experience of diversity, contributes to the prevention discrimination and prejudice and promotes intercultural dialogue. Volunteering also promotes integration of migrants and third country nationals as shown in the CEV-led INVOLVE project³: Volunteering is both an instrument towards and an indicator of integration, when citizens of the so called host community and migrants get involved together in volunteering activities – and when migrants are empowered through volunteering to directly participate in the communities they live in and develop their skills base.

- 7) **Volunteers are a key driver in divided societies towards conflict resolution and peace building.** Northern Ireland, Cyprus and the Balkans are only three examples where conflicts on European territory still persist and where divisions in society are difficult to be overcome. Volunteering bringing people together on concrete projects, making a difference to local communities has proved to be an instrument to re-build bonds of trust between different ethnic or national groups.

- 8) **Volunteers raise the attractiveness of regions by contributing to sustainable development, environmental consciousness and through ecological action:** Volunteers are at the forefront of environmental activism – and direct action towards a clean, bio-diverse and healthy environment enhancing quality of life. While environmental standards and consciousness are often presented as prejudicing economic development, research suggest

¹ <http://www.cev.be/Documents/CEV-MOVEconferenceReport.pdf>

² <http://www.cev.be/Documents/CEV-GAParisReport.pdf>

³ www.involve-europe.eu

that the opposite is true: It enhances public health and well being of a region and can contribute to prevent emigration from the region. And finally, in days of eco-tourism and the search of regions for their specific potential, an attractive and healthy environment will attract (sustainable) tourism.

- 9) **Volunteers play a crucial role on civil protection:** As shown in a EU-funded project⁴, volunteers are the key factor as response to man-made or natural catastrophes, especially in regions with limited financial and logistical means. Fire-fighters, technical assistance, volunteers rebuilding houses and volunteers giving shelter to those affected by catastrophes are just a few examples in this.
- 10) **Volunteering brings” life” into rural areas and areas in risk of (urban) migrations.** The creative potential of volunteers will contribute to promote the cultural and social development of regions and ensure that quality of life is high. In deprived areas with economic difficulties or permanent natural or demographic handicaps such as remote regions with very low population density, voluntary action and participation is often the only means for citizens to take ownership of creating a place worth living in.
- 11) **An enabling environment for employee volunteering can attract business investment and enhance business contribution:** A good volunteering infrastructure as a positive feature for business to invest: Employee volunteering is a means for business to show their corporate citizenship, to benefit from the skills development of their staff and of attracting motivated labour. A brokering local infrastructure is crucial to enable this and can help less developed regions to attract business or to better tap into business that is already there.
- 12) **Volunteering is an economic factor:** The example of England and Wales shows that volunteering has a significant impact on the economy: Approximately 17.9 million people volunteered, and each volunteer contributed an estimated 104 hours in the twelve months before the survey and the total contribution was 1.9 billion hours. This was equivalent of one million full-time workers. At the national average wage their contribution was worth around £22.5 billion. A recent study of volunteer-involving organisations across Europe demonstrated a high level of value: for every €1 organisations spent on supporting volunteers, they received an average return worth between €3 and €8. The Johns Hopkins University estimates the average contribution of the voluntary sector to the GDP of our economies to 5%. This is indeed only one form of measuring volunteering and cannot englobe and describe the full invaluable and immeasurable potential of volunteering. But it demonstrates that volunteering is also an economic factor.

⁴http://www.thw.bund.de/cln_035/nn_942460/EN/content/news/international/trends/2007/06/meldung_001_eu_volunteers.html

CEV Recommends:

- **Encourage member states and regions to recognize volunteering in the different presented forms as a major factor in reaching the goals of regional cohesion and social inclusion and encourage member states and regions to develop targeted strategies and policies in this respect after consultation with volunteering infrastructure organizations**
- **Pay special attention to volunteering when implementing regional funds and encourage member states to recognize volunteering as a horizontal feature in distributing and allocating funds under the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund.**
- **Recognize volunteering as a contribution to co-funding in regional funding instruments such as the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund.**
- **Commit to develop an enabling environment for volunteering: Regional governments shall be encouraged to work on a strategy and provide funds for local volunteering infrastructure. In turns, the endowment with volunteering infrastructure shall be taken into account in statistics and indicators of regional development and benchmarking exercise**
- **In the process of simplification make it easier for local volunteer organizations to access funds and provide direct trainings for the potential receivers of funds**
- **Give real meaning to the “partnership principle” when implementing regional policy and actively seek consultation and partnership with stakeholders from the voluntary sector**
- **Acknowledge the economic value of volunteering and call on national statistical agencies to provide the respective data**
- **Include alternative indicators to measure regional development taking into account the endowment with volunteering infrastructure and the potential to generate social capital**
- **Ensure synergy between the European Regional Policy and other European programmes that do acknowledge the role of volunteering already, such as the “Youth in Action” programme, “Europe for citizens”, Life-long learning and the integration of migrants.**

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